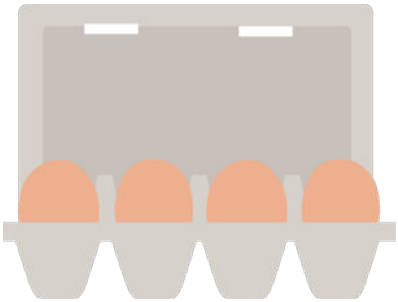
FOOD BANK OF THE ROCKIES™

Neighbor Guide to Food Quality & Safe Handling

Food pantries and grocery stores offer a variety of fresh, frozen, and prepared foods. After selecting these perishable food items, it's up to you to take care of them properly. This guide is designed to help you handle food products carefully and safely.

Once you acquire food, take it directly to where you are staying and put perishables into the refrigerator or freezer. If you do not have access to a refrigerator or freezer, please consider only selecting pantry and canned food items that can be safely stored without refrigeration.



Food Safety

Many cases of foodborne illness occur each year due to improper handling of food in the home. Microorganisms multiply rapidly at temperatures between 40°F/4°C and 140°F/60°C. Unfortunately, the harmful bacteria that cause most cases of foodborne illness cannot be seen, smelled or tasted. Therefore, it's important to:

Keep cold foods cold (40°F/4°C or below) and hot foods hot (140°F/60°C or above).

1. **CLEAN**: Wash hands and surfaces often and thoroughly.
2. **SEPARATE**: Don't cross-contaminate.
3. **COOK**: Cook to proper temperatures to kill bacteria.
4. **CHILL**: Refrigerate promptly. After home cooking, foods can be refrigerated for 2-4 days or frozen up to 3 months.

Refrigerated Food

Refrigerate food, including meat and dairy, to preserve freshness. However, over time, even chilled food begins to go bad.

- Set the refrigerator to maintain a temperature of 40°F/4°C or below.
- Don't overload the refrigerator. Air must circulate freely to cool all foods evenly.
- Leave meat, poultry, and seafood in the store packaging before using. Repeated handling can introduce bacteria into products.
- Store opened food in foil, plastic wrap, leak-proof plastic bags or airtight, food storage containers to keep food from drying out.
- Place meat, poultry, and seafood in the coldest part of the refrigerator.
- Place meat, poultry, and seafood items on the lowest shelf to minimize leakage onto other stored foods.
- Clean the refrigerator regularly to remove spoiled food, odors, and bacteria.

Frozen Foods

Keep the freezer temperature at 0°F/-17°C or below; frozen food quality deteriorates more rapidly above 0°F/-17°C. Remember, freezing to 0°F/-17°C inactivates but does not destroy microbes such as bacteria, yeasts, and molds that can be present in food. Once a frozen food item is thawed, these microbes can become active and, under the right conditions, multiply to levels that can lead to foodborne illness.

- There are three ways to defrost food: in the refrigerator, in a sealed package in cold water, and in the microwave oven. Never defrost or thaw a food product by leaving it out on the kitchen counter.
- Food thawed in the refrigerator can be refrozen without cooking. Plan ahead because food may take several hours to thaw in the refrigerator (or even days for large items like turkeys).
- Foods defrosted in cold water or in the microwave should be cooked immediately.

Fresh Produce

- Raw fruit and vegetables can be held at room temperature, stored in the refrigerator or frozen. For most produce, refrigeration is the best way to maintain quality and delay ripening.
- Wash produce under running water before preparation.
- Once fruits and vegetables are cut, chopped or cooked, they should be placed in the refrigerator within two hours or frozen in plastic freezer containers.

Pantry Storage

Shelf-stable foods such as canned goods, cereal, baking mixes, pasta, dry beans, mustard, ketchup, and peanut butter can be kept safely at room temperature.

To keep these foods at their best quality, store them in clean, dry, cool (below 85°F/30°C) cabinets away from the stove or the refrigerator's exhaust. Extremely hot (over 100°F/38°C) and freezing temperatures are harmful to canned goods.

Never use food from cans that are leaking, rusting, bulging, badly dented, or have a foul odor; cracked jars or jars with loose or bulging lids; or any container that spurts liquid when you open it.

NEVER TASTE such foods. Throw out any food you suspect is spoiled. In general, most canned foods have a long shelf life and, when properly stored, can be stored several years before being opened and eaten.

Never store any foods labeled "keep refrigerated" in the pantry. These foods must be stored in the refrigerator. Many shelf-stable foods remain edible for several weeks, or even months, after opening, however, be sure to read package labels. **Some items must be refrigerated after opening.** Of course, products that become contaminated (bugs in flour, for example) should be immediately thrown out.

Baby Food

- Do not buy or use infant formula and baby food past its "use-by" date. Federal regulations require a date on these products.

Food Product Dating

Dates are printed on many food items, but product dating is not required by federal regulations except on infant formula and baby foods. An expired date doesn't necessarily mean that the food needs to be discarded. Still, it's helpful to understand the differences among package dates.

Here are the three ways that products are dated:

- "Sell By" date - tells the store how long to display the product for sale. You should buy the product before the date expires.
- "Best if Used By (or Before)" – recommended for best flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.
- "Use By" - the last date recommended for use of the product while at peak quality. The manufacturer of the product has determined the date.

This information has been excerpted from the Food Marketing Institute and Cornell University's Food Keeper Guide.